MACKINAC CENTER
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

TEA PARTY ACTIVIST TOOLBOX

Three useful tools for citizens serious about finding ways to restore limited, representative government.

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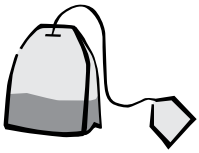

TOOL 1: TEA PARTY ACTIVISTS HAVE ATTITUDE

Samuel Adams, widely believed to be the instigator of the Boston Tea Party, once said that it didn't take an activist majority to prevail, "but rather an irate, tireless minority keen to set brush fires in people's minds."

Setting brushfires requires *attitude*, especially during a time described by Adams, "when vain and aspiring men shall possess the highest seats in Government, (and) our country will stand in need of its experienced patriots to prevent its ruin."

The following describes an attitude that, if widespread, would vastly improve the incentives of lawmakers to honor the principles of limited government.

1. Tea Party activists aren't impressed that their politician is a "nice guy."

Being likeable isn't needed for a person to succeed in America. An insufferable jerk can build a billion-dollar corporation from scratch, employ thousands, save the whales and cure cancer.

What he can't do is win an election. To gain votes in a democracy a candidate must be likeable. The reason political campaigns feature photos of the candidate's family and pets is *not* because they want voters to assume that he or she has a responsible record on taxes and spending.

Therefore, the last thing that should ever impress a Tea Party activist is a politician who's a "nice guy." Simply put: They're *all* nice guys, so get over it and ignore it. Hold them accountable for their deeds rather than their smile. The Tea Parties were a reaction against a lot of very nice guys doing very bad things.

2. Tea Party activists don't presume virtue in party labels.

Political parties are extensions of the politicians that they elect. They are mere instruments to gain power, not virtuous machines that exercise that power in noble ways.

Example: During the term of President Bill Clinton the budget actually had a brief *surplus*, while spending soared under President George W. Bush. Likewise, while Michigan Republican lawmakers boasted of their collective resistance to the $1.4 billion income and business tax hikes passed in 2007, most of them voted for most of the increased spending it funded.

There are countless other examples. An experienced patriot treats the promises of politicians and political parties with equal (and substantial) skepticism. Use political parties only as tools toward *your* ends, not theirs. Your loyalty is too valuable to sell so cheaply.

3. Tea Party activists *really* know their own lawmakers' voting records.

If the "nice guys" aren't a reliable source for a full and accurate picture of their records, and the party label doesn't do it either, then experienced patriots need to find this information on their own.

At the state level, two free tools make this *much* easier in Michigan. The first is MichiganVotes.org, which provides a plain-English description for every vote cast by every member of the Michigan Legislature since 2001. The second is Michigan Capitol Confidential, a periodical that gives more details on votes involving concerns regarding limited government.

An experienced patriot should use both of these tools, and compare how his or her lawmaker measures up by asking these critical questions:

- Does the lawmaker always vote with their party, no matter what?
- If there are a handful of dissenting votes for or against the limited government side of an issue, which side does he or she tend to fall on?
- Do most of the bills he or she introduces expand the size of government, or reduce it?

4. Tea Party activists follow the money.

Is your lawmaker getting financial support from those whose values do not match up with your own? It's not hard to find out. For most past and current Michigan legislators, go to the "Search Voting Record" tab on the MichiganVotes.org homepage, choose a representative or senator and click "search." A link to a list of the legislator's campaign contributors appears below his or her photo. For members of Congress find this information at OpenSecrets.org. (Go to "Politicians and Elections," "Donor Lookup.")

5. Tea Party activists know they don't have to get elected to change the world.

They understand that electing a handful of virtuous lawmakers won't solve the problem either, because what needs to change are the incentives operating on the entire political establishment. Here's how Milton Friedman described it:

"I do not believe that the solution to our problem is simply to elect the right people. The important thing is to establish a political climate of opinion which will make it politically profitable for the wrong people to do the right thing. Unless it is politically profitable for the wrong people to do the right thing, the right people will not do the right thing either, or if they try, they will shortly be out of office."

More often than not the most important effect of an election is who gets *defeated*, not who gets elected. When a politician loses for "doing the wrong thing" the incentives change for *all* of them.

6. Tea party activists don't "repress their feelings" regarding fiscal malpractice.

Having discovered the *real* records of elected officials in their own area and elsewhere (see Items No. 3 and 4), Tea Party activists share this knowledge widely with friends, family, colleagues, internet contacts, etc., letting all and sundry know how *their* lawmakers are behaving, and sharing their feelings regarding the ones who are *mis*behaving.

7. Tea Party activists focus on what unites them, not things that may divide. Those uniting things are:

- ***Grievance*:** Chronic fiscal irresponsibility, now become acute fiscal extremism.
- ***Target*:** A self-serving, self-perpetuating political class that no longer represents the will of the people.
- ***Goal*:** Restore genuine representative, limited government by changing the incentives on elected officials.

TOOL 2: TEN-MINUTE TEA PARTY ACTIVIST

Ten things you can do to keep the Tea Party movement moving ahead

1. Subscribe to the Mackinac Center's free Michigan Capitol Confidential. It reveals which legislators are upholding limited government principles in Lansing — rather than just giving them lip-service at home.

2. Create an account on MichiganVotes.org and sign up for free e-mail notices of action on legislation in "watchlist" categories of interest to you (starting with "taxes").

3. Call, write or e-mail your state representative and senator when they vote or introduce a bill contrary to limited government principles (which you can discover on

MichiganVotes.org and in Capitol Confidential). State lawmakers actually get very little feedback from "real people," so just a few calls on a bill or vote can impact their behavior.

(Note: When you call or write, state your name, address, the bill number and your position. Be brief, be polite, and don't debate, harangue, condemn or argue.)

4. Maximize your electoral clout by always voting in August primary elections. Most legislative and congressional districts are gerrymandered one-party districts, so in Michigan the *real* election happens in August, not November. To lawmakers, August primary voters are distinctly "more equal than others."

(Note: Never vote for a candidate you have not researched. If you're not sure, just don't vote that race — those "none of the above" undervotes also send a message.)

5. If your local newspaper, radio and television news reporters and editors aren't reporting important issues or giving the full story, call and let them know. Let them know when they do good work, too.

6. If you are concerned about government encroachment on the right to own property, subscribe to the Mackinac Center's free property rights newsletter, The Refuge.

7. Talk to your own children and grandchildren. Make certain they understand the principles of personal responsibility, free markets and limited government.

8. Engage in on-line activism. Register on Facebook and become a "fan" of Facebook pages like the Mackinac Center, Capitol Confidential, and other pro-limited government Michigan groups.

9. Consider starting a blog that focuses exclusively on local government and school district issues. Several people can collaborate on this. Become *the* place where people go to discover what tax, spend and over-regulation issues may be brewing right in your back yard. *Become the media.*

10. Network with others in your community to keep an eye on local government and school district activities. When they propose anti-taxpayer measures like tax or spending hikes, organize with your neighbors and protest. When they propose positive measures like spending cuts or privatization, do the same — except protest against the special-interest defenders of the status quo.

TOOL 3: CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEA PARTY ACTIVISTS

Hard-to-dodge questions that suggest whether a candidate for the Michigan Legislature actually supports limited government

Part 1 — These specific measures received votes in the Michigan Legislature. How do you think you would you have voted?

1. Bills to provide substantial tax breaks for ethanol and biodiesel producers. _____

2. Bills that would increase unemployment insurance assessments (taxes) on employers by $70 million annually in order to get $139 million in one-time federal "stimulus" money. _____

3. An amendment adding $9.5 million for low-income youth dental programs in Wayne County. _____

4. A bill allowing local convention and tourism bureaus to levy a 2 percent hotel and motel room tax to support regional marketing and promotion programs. _____

5. "Revenue enhancment" bills to extend for another six years "temporary" increases passed by the previous Legislature in business incorporation fees, investment advisor license fees, etc. _____

6. A bill to spend $60 million raised by borrowing against future tobacco lawsuit proceeds for tourism industry promotion. _____

7. A bill to allow local school districts to levy a "sinking fund" property tax millage that could be used for certain operational expenses (2008 vote and 2009 vote). _____

8. A bill to allow teacher union locals to bargain over a school district privatizing non-instructional services. _____

9. A bill to require unions to annually seek written permission from each individual worker before using that worker's union dues for political purposes. _____

10. A bill to require MESSA (the MEA teacher union's insurance affiliate) to release individual school district claims history data. _____

11. A bill to impose renewable energy mandates on electric utilities. _____

12. A bill to scale back Michigan's electricity competition law. _____

13. A bill to prohibit drilling for oil and gas underneath the Great Lakes (slant drilling). _____

14. Bills to allow local government borrowing (bonding) to cover the cost of government retiree health care benefits (2006 vote and 2009 vote). _____

15. A bill making state government employee post-retirement health benefits an enforceable obligation on the state. _____

16. Bills voted on in the House and Senate that let local school districts increase property taxes by up to 1 mill to operate swimming pools, recreation centers, auditoriums, conference centers, etc. as a "recreation authority." _____

17. A bill to hand out millions of dollars of cash subsidies to Hollywood producers who shoot films in Michigan. _____

Part 2 — General Candidate Preferences

1. Would you support repealing a 22 percent Michigan Business Tax surcharge passed in 2007, and replacing the $700 million it raises each year with budget cuts? _____

2. Will you sign a "no new taxes" pledge? _____

3. Would you support replacing some Michigan prisons with privately managed prisons? _____

4. Would you support "voucherizing" higher education funding so the money follows the students rather than the university? _____

5. Would you support shifting Michigan State Police road patrols to county sheriff deputies if this would save money? (This is strongly opposed by the MSP.) _____

6. Would you support placing all new school employees in defined-contribution pension systems? _____

7. Would you support repealing the "prevailing wage" law that requires union-scale wages to be paid on school and other state construction projects? _____

8. Would you support making Michigan a right-to-work state? _____

9. Can you name three state government programs that you would introduce a bill to eliminate? _____

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The Mackinac Center for Public Policy is dedicated to improving the understanding of economic and political principles among residents, public officials, policymakers and opinion leaders. The Center has emerged as one of the largest and most prolific of the more than 50 state-based free-market "think tanks" in America. More information about the Mackinac Center and its publications can be found at www.mackinac.org.

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